

head up over the top board. Eugene Pengelly caught sight of her, screamed, and hit the gas, making his car fishtail as his tires squealed and kicked up a half a hundred of the fallen hard berries of the Leahy's curb strip Brazilian pepper tree, an organic shotgun blast that made Mr. Ellis Leahy jerk and twitch for the duration of its short-lived fury.

## VIVA LAS VEGAS

When Carmen got tired of the rut she'd worked herself into — dancing at Loma Alta's lone topless bar — she broke out and headed east in her cherry-red Camaro. She wound out Highway 76 under a canopy of sycamore and eucalyptus trees, hit Interstate 15 and blasted up over the crest of the Cajon Pass in less than an hour and bombed into the immense Mojave where she blew through Barstow like it was standing still, next stop Las Vegas.

She checked into The Mint and cleaned up and put on a black slinky dress and rode the elevator down to the casino where she parked herself at the roulette table with a stack of quarter chips, playing three- and four-number combinations until a cuff-linked arm stretched by her neck and placed a hundred-dollar chip on number 26. "For the lady," said the arm's voice. "We'll play her age, for luck." The ball settled into the number 32 slot (Carmen's real age) and Carmen cursed Lady Luck before she turned to let the arm light her cigarette. At the end of the arm was a razor-cut, blow-dried man of craggy-but-handsome features, wearing a very expensive suit. "Perhaps," he said, slipping his gold lighter back into his pocket, "We should have played a lower number." Carmen blew smoke into his face and said, "You shoulda played the fucking number that came up, buck-o."

A smile deepened the man's facial grooves. He offered Carmen his hand and said, "I'm Silvio." Carmen took the hand, noted the baby-soft skin, and said, "I'm Tawny," and with the hint of a mean little smile she added, "And I think all men are swine." Silvio brought her hand to his lips and kissed it and said, with his eyes shining, "Let me prove you wrong."

He didn't, but Carmen didn't care. He financed a night of high-stakes gambling that netted her several thousand dollars, and at the end of the night, at the door to her room when it became apparent that she was planning to leave him out in the cold, and after some clumsy strong-arm tactics on his part that Carmen handled like a pro, he offered her five thousand dollars for one night of sin. She took the money and let him feel her breasts as they sat side-by-side on her bed, and then she brought him off with her hand.



When he wouldn't leave, she did, took her winnings and earnings and caught a cab to The Tropicana.

## MIDNIGHT BLUES

Ellis Leahy pulled the strawberry shake down off the high-speed spindle a split second too soon and received a pink spray of sweet ice milk across the front of his shirt for the miscalculation. He cursed softly and snapped a plastic lid on the paper cup and turned around and slid the shake onto the counter. As he made change for the customer, a pimply-faced string-bean of a youth stepped up and said, "Hey man, there's somebody dead in your bathroom." Ellis closed his eyes, thought, Why does this shit always happen on my shift? and stepped through the kitchen, followed closely by his car-port girl, Kim Rubio. He exited the kitchen and entered the hallway that contained the rest-rooms. The teenaged messenger stood in the flickering fluorescent light on the chipped and curled-up linoleum and said with a deadpan monotone, "In there." Ellis looked the kid up and down and said, "What the hell were you doing in the ladies rest room?" The youth scowled and said, "I'm a girl." Ellis said, "Oh." Then he knocked on the door and called out, "Anybody in there?" "She's dead, asshole," the girl told him. "She's not gonna answer you." Kim Rubio laughed. The girl turned and pushed through the swinging door back into the restaurant's dining room, and Ellis pushed open the door of the tiny one-seater rest room.

Tired, drooping socks were visible under the graffiti-scribbled partition, and a pair of scuffed men's dress shoes. Ellis rapped on the stall door and received no answer. He turned to Kim and said, "You wanna crawl under there and unlock the door for me?" She crossed her arms and said, "No fucking way, man." So Ellis hunkered down and stuck his head and shoulder under the door and reached up and unlocked it. When he stood back up he asked Kim, "Who the hell is watching the car-port while you're fucking off in here?" She knew he was trying to get rid of her so she said, "Julio can handle it; don't worry." Ellis held onto the unlocked stall door. "How can he run the grill and the car-port at the same time?" "Would you open the God damned door," Kim snapped at her boss. Some old dead lady was not something that would blow Kim Rubio away. She hailed from Posole Town, Loma Alta's mean streets' barrio, where gunshots and mayhem were nightly affairs. When Ellis swung the door open, her only response was the two syllable, "Oh gross," with an accompanying wrinkle of the nose.

It was a bag lady, filthy and, in life, schizophrenic. She had been a regular customer at Loma Alta's coast route Burger 'N' Run, had been a vociferous believer in Jesus.